

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Funeral of Bishop Les Walker, first Bishop of Mpumalanga
26 November 2009

Psalm 139

1 Peter 1:3-9

Matthew 5:3-10

May I speak in the name of God, the Father Almighty, who, by the power of his Holy Spirit, raised his Son from death to life, that we might come to our eternal home, in the place that he has prepared for us.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ – dear Marian and Angus, dear family and friends, dear colleagues and dear guests from near and far – I expect that many of you, like me, are finding it hard to comprehend that we should be here today for the funeral of our dear friend and bishop, Les.

Of course, we knew he was unwell, that his heart was weak.

We knew the operation was necessary.

We knew that it was not without risk.

But we still did not expect to be here today – at St George's, where he began his ministry, in order now to mark its ending.

For my own part, it seems only yesterday that I came to join in celebrating the fifth birthday of the Diocese of Mpumalanga – it was truly only in June.

What joy we had – and what fun later, dear Marian, as, with my family, we went together to the Kruger park, and then stayed at your home.

Hospitality was truly one of Les' great gifts, along with his tremendous sense of humour, that could cross all boundaries.

It is almost beyond our ability to grasp that we shall not hear his jokes, his voice, again.

Therefore, let us allow other words to ring in our ears – those with which our service began: 'I am the resurrection and I am the life: he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live; and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.'

We know that, if these words were ever true for anyone, they are most certainly true for Les.

Dear sisters and brothers – we are here today to bring to God our grief, even as we give thanks the life of a wonderful man, and commend him to the everlasting care of the one who is the Resurrection and the Life.

We come to hear God's words of comfort to us – the words of the one who has gone before us, walked the whole length of the valley of the shadow, and, through his own self-giving death, opened the gates of glory beyond for all believers.

Les, we know, has passed through those gates, and for this we rejoice.

Yet we remain; and we feel his absence more keenly than we can say.

Our Gospel reading held this promise: 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.'

It is not that we, in our bereavement, are automatically granted such consolation.

Rather, it is God's invitation to us to face, with openness and honesty, the pain of our loss, and to bring this anguish to him.

For Jesus, who wept at the grave of his dear friend Lazarus – though knowing he would rise – this Jesus understands our tears even as we believe.

In him we find a safe place to bring our weeping, for our dear friend.

And in him we find the words of eternal life, which no other has to offer to us.

I first came to know Les when he was at St Albans – though many here, especially his sisters, will have known him for far, far, longer.

Behind his laughter was a deeply spiritual man, and a profound teacher, whose life reflected a great love for the Lord.

He spoke his mind, and was unafraid to name, and even embrace, the pains he saw within society; and with them, also, the pains that come with the Christian life, the pains that come with ordained ministry.

As St Peter wrote, 'for a little while' we must all 'suffer grief in all kinds of trials', even while we persist in holding fast to the faith that is ours, the 'new birth into a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead' which we have been given.

Another pain Les knew – deep pain and tragedy, for all that we know a greater hope – a pain shared with many here today; came from the death of Cindy, almost two years ago.

Only those who have themselves lost a child can fathom the deep distress this brings.

Marian, we particularly hold you in your prayers as this anniversary draws close, so soon after Les' death. Angus too – you also have a special place in our hearts at this time.

Yet Les knew, as the Psalmist also attested in the words we heard [said / sung] earlier, that even in our darkest moments, we can neither flee, nor be separated, nor be hidden, from your presence. In the face of death, your hand shall still lead us, your right hand shall hold us fast.

Bishop Les' deep honesty and integrity I came to know more when we, along with Bishop Dino Gabriel, were brand new 'baby bishops' together, brought together for training under the wing of Bishop Duncan.

We prayed, we wrestled in discussion, we studied together – we shared jokes, and we shared our personal struggles.

This brought about a spiritual bond which we subsequently maintained.

Bishop Les was a valued member of the Synod of Bishops, where he was not afraid to speak his mind, or offer advice where he thought we needed it.

He initiated a portfolio on mental health, and was passionate about helping the church better to deal with psychological challenges often faced by those whom we are called to minister.

Bishop Les was not afraid to ask if there was something he did not know.

This is, for me, one of the true signs of a good leader – and a mark of true humbleness of spirit, and of holy meekness, which draws out the blessings of which our gospel passage spoke.

He would say ‘We are a young diocese – What should we be doing here?’

And yet, he had a wise judgement of the true priorities he needed to pursue.

When I was here in June, for the 5th anniversary celebrations, Les showed me the library in the Diocesan Centre.

I looked at it, and said, ‘Les, you need to buy more books!’

‘No, Archbishop’ he said to me, ‘our first priority is more water tanks for the poorer parishes.’

He understood that these physical resources, so essential to human physical well-being, were also a powerful sign of God's commitment both to cleansing, and to refreshing and reviving.

In the same way, water, the medium of our baptism, speaks to us of holy mysteries, that unite us with Christ, and call us to a life of worship, witness and service, empowered by the Holy Spirit of God, flowing through us.

This was the life Les modelled himself, and, in partnership with you, Marian, encouraged others to follow.

A few months ago, Les gave me a crucifix, hand-carved from jacaranda wood.

As I look back at this, I feel he was telling me to hold on to Christ, in the little details of every-day living.

The jacaranda, with its purple blossom, is so beautiful.

Yet as these flowers fall, they can make a terrible mess, and be slippery, even dangerously so, when wet.

The realities of ministry – indeed, all of life – are not so different. There is so much on which we can slip, if we do not hold on to our living Lord, Jesus Christ, through every situation.

So we must hold on to the resurrection hope that is ours in Jesus Christ – holding on in confidence. As St Peter reminds us, and as Les knew personally, the harsh fires of life do refine us, if we let them.

Therefore, dear clergy and people of the Diocese of Mpumalanga, as you mourn your bishop, hold fast to all he taught you, by word and example; and uphold on another in prayer.

Last Sunday was the feast of Christ the King. The collect reminded us that he is the King of the Universe, in whom all things are restored, and brought under his gracious rule.

Les now knows him as his Christ, his Messiah; and as his King, in ways we still glimpse as in a mirror dimly.

Even so, we affirm the kingship of Jesus in our lives. We affirm his lordship over everything in heaven and on earth. We affirm his victory over sin and death.

And therefore, though we do indeed mourn; as St Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, we do not grieve as those who have no hope (1 Thess 4:13).

More than this, next Sunday is Advent Sunday.

In the season of Advent we prepare to celebrate once again, our Lord's first coming as Emmanuel, Christ with us; and we look forward to his coming again, in the fulness of his glory.

Today we proclaim that for Les, Christ has indeed come, and he is one with him, in his eternal kingdom.

May the knowledge of this mystery comfort us; and may it help us in our resolve to walk with Christ, and be a means of his coming, especially to those who are ailing; to the poor; to the hurting; to the marginalised – so that they may also encounter Emmanuel, Christ with them, in their need.

Dear friends, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear Marian and Angus, and all who loved Les and mourn his passing -

We know that Les have had a weak heart, physically.

But spiritually it was a strong heart, a large heart, a heart that beat with love for his family, his friends, his diocese, his clergy, his people.

He had a heart that overflowed with love for the Lord, and overflowed with the Lord's love for others.

Our first reading spoke of this, as St Peter wrote, 'Though you have not seen him [that is, seen Jesus], you love him.'

And St Peter went on to say this: 'even though you do not see him now, you believe in him, and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.'

This is God's promise to all of us.

And today we claim it as God's promise to Les – believing that he has indeed received the salvation that is his.

Let me end by recollecting that Les, as many of you know, was a keen fisherman.

Yet, like other fishermen before him, he heard the voice of the one who called and said 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.'

Now that friend of fishermen has called him home.

May he rest in peace, and rise in glory.

Amen